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ABSTRACT

In response to the need for attention and support perceived by participants in a summer institute for building equity in early literacy, this booklet offers 12 pieces of advice for teachers and administrators trying to implement school literacy improvement plans. The advice presented in the booklet is: (1) do not be intimidated by other people's successes; (2) do not get caught in the "jargon" trap; (3) do not over-plan or over-organize; (4) avoid forms without functions; (5) consider the possibility that the people who resist your plan may have good reasons for doing so; (6) realize that parent involvement is a two-edged sword; (7) K.I.S.S.--keep it simple, stupid; (8) do not overlook the social and psychological needs of learners; (9) do not expect dramatic increases in test scores as a result of a new program; (10) be proud, as an educator, of who you are and what you do; (11) persuade teachers to change to developmental literacy programs (easier than is thought); and (12) remember that the saving grace of being an educator is that you get to start over every year. (RS)

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LITERACY IMPROVEMENT SERIES
FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATORS

Beginning a School Literacy Improvement Project: Some Words of Advice

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For four days this past summer I attended the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) Summer Institute, Building Equity in Early Literacy: A Team Approach, held in Canby, Oregon. Like the other 50 or so participants, principals and teachers from 14 schools in four states, I was there with my team to work for a literacy improvement plan for our school. At the same time, I was acting as a facilitator for two other school teams and was slated to give the Institute closing address. Before coming to the Institute I had prepared a talk on the psychological and social dimensions of literacy learning that I believed would be informative and helpful, but as the Institute progressed, I came more and more to feel that my planned talk was far off the mark.

Perhaps my own split role made me more aware of the apprehension emanating from the people around me than I would have been otherwise. I realized that the information I planned to give was not at all what they wanted or needed to hear. Instead of information about the psychological needs of children, they needed some attention to and support for their own psyches. So, the night before I was to give my closing address, I tossed out the original script and wrote a new one: a message from an "old war horse" to the fresh recruits.

Although I cringe at calling myself an "old war horse," I must admit that it is my long and tumultuous experience that gives me the authority to speak in the company of experts. As a teacher for 18 years, a principal for 13, a superintendent for four, a seasoned writer, curriculum planner, and staff developer, I have seen, if not all, most of the innovations of the past three decades from the inside and discovered that they are neither panaceas nor frauds. Programs, models, approaches and materials are the tools of our trade that we can use either badly or well. Having done both many times over, I feel qualified to point out the dangers and the opportunities that go along with trying something new. The school literacy improvement plans designed at the Summer Institute are so idealistic and demanding that there are sure to be bumps in the road ahead. Teachers and principals need to know how to cushion the ride for their students and themselves and how to keep going when it seems like there's no gas left in the tank. Here's my advice.

1 Don't be intimidated by other people's successes.

When we hear about the wonderful accomplishments of other schools—how their test scores rose, teacher morale improved, parents became satisfied and students became more productive—it's easy to feel apprehensive about our own improvement efforts. But we must remember that people reporting successes usually don't say much about their failures. Although they mean to be truthful, the steps to success are what loom largest in their minds, and all else seems unimportant. They don't want to clutter and confuse their stories with details of actions that went nowhere. Remember, too, that even the most resounding successes tend to be incomplete ones: Not all students learn, not all teachers change, and not all parents are satisfied. A successful program is when you can say: "We are doing better than before and most of us feel good about the change."

As you work through your own literacy improvement plans, you will have difficulties similar to the ones faced by those who have gone before. With perseverance, you, too, can succeed. The key elements are not a foolproof plan and an exceptional crew of teachers but the ability to respond to problems quickly and decisively: acknowledging mistakes, making changes, and trying again.

2 Don't get caught in the "jargon" trap.

So much of the language in any specialized field is a shorthand to save the participants the trouble of having to define and explain all the time. Thus, jargon is a convenience and a time saver. But, unfortunately, the jargon of education is neither stable nor precise. Terms that refer to curricular and instructional changes, such as "whole language" or "cooperative learning," become more diffuse in meaning as their popularity grows. Other terms, such as "parent involvement" and "teacher empowerment" are always vague because they are slogans, intended to appeal to the emotions of a general audience, not to communicate precise information to planners and decision makers. As a result, we may find ourselves agreeing with ideas that we don't truly understand or understand differently from others. Someone says "authentic assessments" and

we all applaud until we realize he means attaching point values to the work in a portfolio. But by then it may be too late to put on the brakes.

Recognizing the imprecision of educational jargon, we need to be very clear about meaning when it matters. In planning a project or making a decision, do not hesitate to ask people—including yourself—to define, explain and give examples of the terms being bandied about. And be persistent. In interactions of these kinds I try to avoid jargon altogether and use descriptive phrases instead. Although I may say "whole language" in a conversation with friends, in a planning session I talk about "using tradebooks," "writing character diaries," and "dramatizing stories." Clear, descriptive language jolts people awake and forces them to confront their own and other people's meanings. Descriptive phrases in themselves probably are not sufficient, but they start the thinking, questioning, discussing process needed for sound planning.

3 Don't over-plan or over-organize.

Solid organization and planning are necessary, of course, but educators, acutely aware of their responsibilities to students, tend to carry on these phases too long before actually getting their projects underway. As time passes and nothing happens, people lose enthusiasm or, worse, their grip on reality. As curriculum planners we tend to fall in love with our own words, diagrams and time frames, preferring their neatness to the messiness of real schools and classrooms. Before that happens, while we are still bound tightly to the job we have to do today, let's get going. When a general plan has been worked out and people know their roles, it is time to "just do it." If the risks make you nervous, limit the scope and time length of the project at first and call it a pilot study. As the pilot unfolds, continue planning, helped by what you've learned by working through problems. Planning turns out to be easier and more effective when it runs concurrent with practice.

As an aside, I must say that I prefer planning during the school year to planning in summer. In spite of the stresses and the scarcity of time during the year, teachers and principals who are facing children every day tend to be realistic and flexible about their plans.

"Stop, this isn't working" is useful feedback you just can't get in the summertime.

4 Avoid forms without functions.

One bad habit that we've picked up from textbooks and some of our own teachers is trying to learn "how to do" something without a real "something" to do. When people are asked to simulate brainstorming, shared decision making, strategic planning, goal setting, etc., as training for the work ahead, they often get irritated with the processes, not realizing that a process can't work properly if there is no substance to put into it and no investment in its outcome. A better way to learn process is to start small and simple with a real task, one easily evaluated by its results or lack thereof, and one that will not make or break the project. If you are working on parent involvement in children's reading, for example, start with a low-cost social evening at school. Find out if the notices you send home with children really get there, if Friday is a good night for your community, if parents have transportation, if they feel comfortable coming to school. No matter how badly you do the first time through, you will have learned valuable lessons for that future time when your family literacy project is on the line. You will be far better prepared than if you had just learned the forms of home-school communication.

5 Consider the possibility that the people who resist your plan may have good reasons for doing so.

Usually, but not always, good people are willing to become part of a good project. If you start getting more resistance than you expected, or resistance from people who are ordinarily cooperative, the problem may not be with them. Most often, what's wrong is that teachers feel that a project is being done "to them," not "with them." Here again, the jargon tells us that people need "ownership," but it does not tell us how to transfer enthusiasm, understanding, accomplishment and pride from a small group of planners to a large group of doers. (There are a number of effec-

tive strategies that I do not have space to describe here, but a lecture presentation to a large captive audience at 4 p.m. on a school day is not one of them.) If winning teachers' hearts and minds is not yet part of your plan, you'd better add that now.

Another roadblock is the detail blindness many conceptualizers seem to have. Is it genetic or a side effect of the manic state we're in when we are generating terrific ideas? In either case, don't be surprised or hurt to find out that you have neglected a few small points in your plan that people on the implementation end need to have clearly outlined for them. They are right to be concerned, for example, about how much extra time narrative report cards are going to take or who is going to run interference with parents who want grades.

If, after you've attended to all the details, people still show little enthusiasm, it may be a matter of a good project at the wrong time or in the wrong place. In a school where teachers are hurting because of a situation that has nothing to do with your project, they won't want to take risks or work harder or try something new. Basic problems of trust, fairness, respect, and reasonable compensation have to be settled before an innovation can take hold, unless the innovation is aimed directly at making working conditions better. Only when the pressure of basic problems is relieved will most people feel comfortable enough to move forward into an innovative project.

6 Parent involvement is a two-edged sword.

All of us in schools want parents to care about their children's learning, to help their children get full benefit from the educational opportunities available, and to speak up strongly for their children's rights and needs. But we resent it when parents try to run the show. Unfortunately the lines between caring and control, between rights and privileges, between parental concern and political pressure are not clear. Every school has parents who cross those lines recklessly, creating messy situations and pain for everyone. Of course, school people sometimes cross those same lines from the other direction, exerting more control over students' lives than they have a right to, and then parents are legitimately resentful.

What a school needs is a philosophy and a plan for the exercise of power. In the old days, such a plan was not necessary because the school's absolute authority was uncontested. For good or ill, those days are gone, and now schools must choose between giving away some of their power in an orderly process and having it all wrenched away by force. School councils that include teachers, administrators, parents and other citizens are a common, and potentially effective, manifestation of the new reality. All these factions have a legitimate voice in making decisions about schools, but they need a structured framework to make them in—one that specifies which decisions rightfully belong to an elected board, which to an appointed administration, which to teachers hired for their expertise, and which to parents and other citizens who have a personal stake in the education of the community's children.

I would argue that such councils work best where there is an informal but rigorous training process for parents, operating through participation in a parent-teacher organization, assisting in classrooms, serving on committees and just being around teachers and principals as they do their jobs and children as they learn. Having parents and educators working together in the trenches produces the mutual understanding and respect needed for a productive relationship. Any school venturing into shared governance should make citizen training part of its plan and loosen the reins of decision making gradually. If I sound authoritarian here, I apologize, but I stand firm. I will not give over my responsibility for the education of children to people who have not yet demonstrated their understanding of this complex enterprise.

7 K.I.S.S.— Keep it simple, stupid.

This expression, borrowed from Peters and Waterman's book, *In Search of Excellence,* reminds us that if we really want people in an organization to live by its goals and understand its structure, we have to keep those things few and uncomplicated. When a system becomes so complex that there are long lists of objectives, many layers of management and flow charts to explain the process of communication, only the top managers really know (maybe) what is going on. Teachers, administrators and paraprofessionals who are working full time with children and curriculum need simplicity

in an innovative project. When a project is too complicated, most participants will give it only lip service while waiting for it to go away—as it most certainly will. If we want people to make an innovation their own, we have to be sure that the ideas and the basics of operation are simple enough to be understood quickly and lived with on a daily basis.

8 Don't overlook the social and psychological needs of learners.

With any instructional program, no matter how carefully structured, how clearly written the materials or how elegant the teaching method, some students can—and do—tune out because their minds and hearts are elsewhere. Reading a novel or writing an essay is probably never the most important thing in a child's world. But for many children the situation may be worsened by the fact that a particular book does not touch their lives or a project seems too big for them to ever finish it. If a child also feels that he has failed before or that other children don't want to work with him, he may truly not be able to do what his teacher thinks is well within his intellectual grasp. As educators, our job is not only to teach but also to create a climate for learning and keep it hospitable throughout the times when working to master skills is not easy or fun. Part of that climate in a language arts class comes from the appeal and richness of the materials, and part from the meaningfulness, variety and social interaction of the tasks. But there is also a third part that comes from the set of unspoken beliefs prevailing in the classroom. In order to learn a child must believe: I am a learner; I can do this work; craftsmanship and effort will pay off for me; this is a community of friends and I belong to it. Because such beliefs often are not the inherent property of children who come from splintered families and dangerous neighborhoods, teachers today must work as hard on them as they have always worked on the intellectual side of learning.

While advocating for the needs of children, we must not forget that teachers also have social and psychological needs. They, too, are learners who need to find worth and pleasure in their work and value in themselves. If a new program doesn't help them to feel more important, more successful, closer to their students and colleagues, they probably won't put very much into it or care

whether or not it succeeds. Forget the research, the theory and the testimonials; successful programs and projects nurture adults as well as children.

9 Don't expect dramatic increases in test scores as a result of a new program.

Unfortunately, literature-based reading and standardized tests do not mix well. The skills emphasized in the tests are not the same ones emphasized in teaching, and vice versa. Moreover, children working in literature-based programs are not used to the multiple choice formats of standardized tests. In their classrooms they demonstrate proficiency through real world activities, such as writing, research, discussion and oral performances. When they are forced to take a standardized test instead, they do reasonably well because, after all, they can read and they can write, but they do not blow the top off the test. They leave that feat for those students who have been schooled in "test wiseness" and/or taught the specific content of the test.

Schools that have changed from basal programs to literature-based developmental programs are wise to give their students some practice with standardized test formats and procedures before they take the official tests. Practice helps to level the playing field so that students can demonstrate what they know in an unfamiliar situation.

10 Educators should be proud of who they are and what they do.

Whenever I hear teachers characterized as lazy, incompetent or unwilling to change, I am amazed. The ones I know bear no resemblance to that stereotype. Their most serious fault is that they want to save all children and blame themselves when they can't.

That is the kind of teacher and administrator I met at the NWREL Summer Institute: They worked from nine to five and came back in the evening for more; they talked shop all through meals; they fine-tuned their literacy plans late at night instead of partying. And sometimes, unfortunately, they berated themselves because they couldn't do more, faster and better.

As you begin work on your literacy projects, treat yourselves kindly; laugh more. Your work, whether or not it shows up on standardized test results, benefits children. You are giving while so many people are just taking. Be proud of that fact.

11 Persuading teachers to change to developmental literacy programs will be easier than you think.

In the years that I've spent working with literature-based reading, realistic writing processes, functional oral language and integrated curriculum, I've never had to pressure teachers to participate. When they see the exciting things that some of their colleagues are doing in their classrooms, most teachers beg to get on board. Even when you warn them that they will have to write their own units and invent student activities and projects, that they will have to keep anecdotal records and do complex evaluations, rather than just count right answers, they are still eager to be creative and autonomous and to engage their students in real learning. Students, too, want to change for much the same reasons.

Once into real books and real writing, teachers find that teaching with literature is actually easier than a traditional program. When the materials are interesting and the assignments are stimulating, students put in much more time and effort than they do with basals and workbooks, and they are less tempted to get into mischief. Teachers have fewer assignments to correct and fewer grades to record; students take more responsibility for sustaining discussion and planning their own projects; completed projects and units lead naturally into new ones and the whole curriculum transforms itself from an arbitrary sequence into an organic structure.

12 The saving grace of being an educator is that you get to start over every year.

Having time off in the summer is a wonderful bonus in this job, but it isn't as rewarding or renewing as the fact of a fresh start each fall. There is time to reflect on the past year's successes and failures, time to look around at promising practices that others are using, time to regain your composure and confidence. Then you start

over with children who don't know your faults and failures and are ready to believe that you and they can work miracles together. No one in any other profession is blessed with such an opportunity. Each August we renew our ideals and dream our dreams. Each September we begin again to make them all come true.

Suggested Readings

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About the Author

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